

Poetry

WHAT A WARRIOR WHISPERS

(triptych after
Gentileschi)

by
L.J. Sysko

What A Warrior Whispers

*After Judith Severing the Head of Holofernes, c. 1620,
Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656)*

Abra, I feathered for us
a heavy nest with my

grunting cut. Sword & sparrow,
we bore up our truthful

heft then found our wings
lacked breadth. We are

Earth-bound forever
in the same predicament:

oxen with no
purchase for our yokes.

His dead expression farms
a familiar furrow:

intention robbed
of agency. We speak

nothing of chasms
between what once was

and what could be—
truth & actuality,

planter & yield,
soldier &

battlefield, tongues
mortified on history's

single bed.

What A Warrior Whispers

*After Susanna and the Elders, 1610,
Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656)*

Men I once knew skulk in cloaks
at horizon line:

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archers' clouts I pierce
for practice. This wall's

replete with What. I've. Been
hunting so far—

hare & hart
set Ready Up under

short order lamps.
They offer themselves

to Diana's Arbalest,
like truckers stopping

at my dangerous diner,
sign blinking neon in the night,

while I, a sharpened shaft—
Heart Attack on Rack,

Blonde with Sand, Mystery
in the Alley—

permit myself
to let fly.

Order's up,
Cherry.

What A Warrior Whispers

After *Self-Portrait as La Pittura*, 1638-1639,
Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656)

What A
Warrior
Whispers

Caravaggio began
with brush handle dipped in oil,

hushing with silver then
tracing his route farther

into forest satin,
dark & loamy as lies.

I peer out
from behind a tree.

A human paintbrush.
A doe

having drunk
from her own Red Lake,

shrinking into puddle.
My virginity went to trial,

where words I'd never spoken
ringed my fingers then tightened

into gold vices. Their sketch
mattered more than the girl

I'd drawn.

On the promontory

of a palette, I stand.

A sapling

rooted on the edge.

L.J. Sysko is the author of *BATTLEDORE* (Finishing Line Press). Her work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *BEST NEW POETS*, *Rattle*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and *SWWIM Every Day*, among others.

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